



GEAR UP Educator Development Initiative

Preparing Students for the High School Transition

GEAR UP's mission is to increase the academic performance and preparation of low-income students to enter and complete a postsecondary education. To ensure this mission, all students will need to stay in school, progress, graduate, and be prepared to succeed in postsecondary education. However, studies have found difficult high school transitions can contribute to low achievement, high dropout rates, and reduced on-time graduation rates (e.g., Herlihy, 2007). In addition, low-income students are even at greater risk as they face academic challenges such as having the largest student dropouts, the lowest standardized test scores, and are the least likely to enroll and earn a college degree (ACT, 2010; Steinberg and Almeida, 2008). This overview highlights key findings and provides effective practices from current research on middle to high school student transitions to inform GEAR UP programs.

Middle School to High School Transitions

For many students, entry into ninth grade is their first exposure to a departmentalized curriculum, increased academic demands, academic tracking, ordering of ability via class rankings, graduation requirements, and often times a larger environment (Benner and Graham, 2009; Smith, 2007). Akos and Galassi found students top concerns and anticipations during the middle school to high school transition appeared to identify with three separate but interrelated components— academic, procedural, and social (2004). This study found academic concerns were coping with increased homework and more difficult courses; procedural concerns involved navigating around and dealing with the complexities of a larger school environment including multiple classes taught by different teachers; while social concerns included fitting in and making new friends, getting along with peers, and coping with bullies or older students (2004). Another study found middle school students identified academic ability as especially important to making it in secondary school and these students after entering high school added time management, ability to stay on task, social skills, and behavior as essential elements in success (Zeedyk et al., 2003). Schools should aim to provide transitions activities that address student concerns and the complexities of their needs to be prepared to graduate high school and be prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

Effective Transition Practices

Transition to high school is a comprehensive process that involves a collaborative effort with middle and high school administrators, teachers, parents, and students (Mizelle, 1999, 2005). Feeder middle schools and receiving high schools should communicate to identify distinctive components of academic, social, and procedural concerns in the middle school to high school transition (Gibson, 1969; Akos and Galassi, 2004). Several organizations have provided effective transition programs research summaries.

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) authored by Smith (2006) presents key components essential to effective middle to high school transition programs:

- Ensure collaboration between eighth and ninth grade building/personnel;
- Provide targeted early intervention(s) to support academic recovery for failing students;

- Make available to students and families pertinent and consistent information about the academic, social, and organizational similarities and differences between middle school and high school;
- Offer information on the curriculum (e.g., academic rigor of courses), facilities (e.g., location of classrooms and restrooms), safety and discipline (e.g., rules and discipline code).

The Texas Comprehensive Center (TCC) research brief authored by Beckwith and McQueeney (2010) recommends organizing a “Transition Team” that develops/implements a transition plan that prepares students for high school. TCC recommends that transitions plans should include:

- Promoting collaboration among middle and high school staff to support the transition process
- Involving parents and families in the transition process
- Increasing awareness of academic programs offered at the high school level
- Providing resources designed to make the transition easier
- Increasing comfort and reduce anxiety through orientation activities
- Designing activities for the first weeks of ninth grade
- Continuing the use of teams to maintain support students throughout the ninth-grade year
- Developing special programs and initiatives to support ninth graders who may be struggling academically and/or socially

Education Partnerships, Inc. (EPI) research brief authored by Williamston (2010) also stressed providing students and families with useful and accurate information, supporting students’ social needs, working collaboratively with teachers, administrators, parents, and students from both schools as being effective transitions strategies. In addition, they also recommend supporting high academic expectations for all students and supporting academic preparation for high school. EPI recommends middle schools have:

- An effective instructional program
- A rigorous and challenging curriculum
- A commitment to providing students with additional time and support if needed

Conclusion

GEAR UP programs will need to address GEAR UP students’ transition needs that occur within their middle school to high school transition. Working collaboratively with teachers, administrators, parents, and students to create a “Transition Team” that identifies students’ transition needs will be extremely important as they develop plans to address them. This overview provided effective practices from current research that address academic, social, and procedural concerns on middle to high school student transitions.

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College: My Dream. My Plan

The GEAR UP Educator Development Initiative is a program of the UW Office of Minority Affairs & Diversity and a partner of Washington State GEAR UP.